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ABSTRACT

Descriptions of educational practice offer an array of important, but typically hidden dimensions of meaning which provide potentially rich resources for understanding the practices. This paper illustrates: (1) how analysis, interpretations, and assessments interpenetrate what appear to be descriptions and suggest how readers can tease out these dimensions of meaning; (2) how descriptions take on dimensions of meaning within contexts of discourse through the functions they serve; (3) how authors choose among vehicles of expression of three types-media, foci, and terms (literal ordinary language, vocabularies of disciplines, and figurative language)--in ways that reflect and convey their views of educational practice, teaching, and the particular practices that are the subjects of their descriptions; and (4) how descriptions provide grist for eliciting the rationales and generalizable approaches of the teachers portrayed (filtered through the selective lenses of descriptions' authors). (Author/PN)

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Uncovering the Hidden Dimensions of Meaning in Descriptions of Educational Practice

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I. Introduction

Issues associated with description of educational practice have been viewed as fundamental problems in education by teachers, teacher supervisors, teacher educators, curriculum planners, researchers, and evaluators (Eisner, 1979; Guttchen, 1966; Huebner, 1966, 1975; Kelly, 1973). Yet, until recently there has been a dearth of sustained discussion concerning the dimensions of meaning about educational practice conveyed in descriptions of educational practice.

Currently, a number of investigators have focused attention on the dimensions of meaning conveyed in descriptions by arguing that the discursive, concensual language typically used to describe educational practice is inadequate to capture many important aspects of educational experience (Eisner, 1972, 1975, 1976, 1979; Huebner, 1966; Kelly, 1975; McCutcheon, 1976; MacDonald, 1965, 1971; Mann, 1969; Shulman, 1970; Stuffelbeam, 1967; Vallance, 1975, 1976, 1977; Westbury, 1970). Investigators have also focused attention on the meanings conveyed in descriptions by highlighting the value systems associated with different languages used to describe educational practice (Eisner and Vallance, 1974; Huebner, 1966; Joyce and Weil, 1972).

We contend that descriptions of educational practices offer an array of important, but typically hidden dimensions of meaning, which provide potentially rich resources for understanding the practices. These resources include: 1) authors' implicit or explicit analyses, interpretations and assessments and the context in which they embed descriptions; 2) authors' views about the practices revealed in their choices of media, foci, and terms; and 3) teachers' conceptions and pedagogical approaches revealed in the environments they create. In this paper, we will characterize descriptive discourse and then characterize and illustrate some of the hidden, and typically undisclosed, dimensions of meaning available in descriptive discourse. Our purposes are to help authors choose their vehicles of expression with a keener sense of the meanings they are convey-

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ing, to help educators read descriptions of educational practice with greater acumen and understanding as they unpeel the layers of meaning communicated in any description, and to develop analytical categories and approaches for use by curriculum theorists in studying educational discourse.

II. Characterization of Descriptive Discourse in Education

Descriptions of educational practice serve fundamentally important purposes in education. Huebner (1966) points to some of these purposes when he asks, "How does a teacher talk about his instruction as he plans it or as he describes it to another? How does the supervisor describe the classroom situation as he seeks to help the teacher? How does the curriculum planner talk about the events which he wants to happen in the classroom? How does the teacher educator discuss classroom phenomena with his students? How does the researcher describe the classroom events that he studies" (p. 13)? Guttchen (1966) notes the important role served by descriptions in guiding practice, commenting, "as we . . . are concerned with guidance of practice, we ought to know what we are talking about under the heading of practice. In this connection, we have a large stake in the adequacy of descriptions of practice" (p. 193). Other investigators have pointed to the important role served by descriptions of educational practices within evaluation reports (Eisner, 1979; Kelly, 1973). Kelly argues, "it is important for the evaluator to be able to reconstruct the object of his evaluation . . . to increase the shared experience of the curriculum. One basis that will help to bring about this sharing is program description" (pp. 4-6).

Educational practitioners have expended considerable effort in developing languages for describing educational activity. Huebner (1966) comments:

> This problem of description of educational activity has been solved in many ways. Most methods books have some kind of solution. The studies of teaching by Hughes, Smith, Ascher, Bellack and many others are all efforts to develop a language which can be used to describe classroom action. Teachers have their own way of talking and thinking about what they are doing in the classroom. Many of the studies of newer curricula are descriptions of what teachers can do in classrooms with students (p. 13).

Exponents of "educational connoisseurship" and "educational criticism" as alternative modes of educational inquiry, evaluation, and communication have explored the uses of non-discursive evocative language in rendering educational activities (e.g., Eisner, 1979; Vallance, 1977). Huebner (1975) observes that a major

task of the curriculum theorist is to develop languages to describe educational environments. Clearly, descriptions of educational activities hold a prominent place in educational practice and educational theorizing. In any of these contexts, it is pertinent to consider the various dimensions of meaning about educational practice conveyed in descriptions.

What exactly is descriptive discourse? Descriptions of educational practice are first-order approximations of reality which represent salient characteristics of the educational activities associated with a practice. Descriptions can be communicated orally or in writing. In this paper, we focus specifically on written descriptions, although our analysis is applicable to oral descriptions. Descriptions may be written retrospectively, by observers or participants, as reconstructions of activities observed or remembered; or prospectively, with the aim of encoding visions of practice consistent with conceptions of education.

A variety of techniques are available for descriptive representation of educational practice, ranging from deeply-textured narrative accounts to categorized descriptive summaries. Examples from the literature of "open education" will be used to further illustrate the character and range of descriptive discourse and to serve as grist for discussion of the dimensions of meaning conveyed in descriptions. Numerous other descriptions of educational activities could serve equally well as examples and reference points, particularly the field notes recorded by participant-observers in ethnographic studies (e.g., Smith and Keith, 1971) and the increasing number of "descriptive portrayals" used in the service of "educational criticism" (Eisner, 1979). We use descriptions from the literature of "open education" as examples because this literature contains both deeply-textured and categorized accounts, written by authors who approach the same types of practices from different perspectives. Thus, this literature illustrates particularly well the diverse dimensions of meanings conveyed in descriptions of educational practice.

Barth (1969) notes the widespread use of narrative descriptions to communicate about "open education", commenting:

> most accounts of open education have been anecdotal and descriptive painting . . . a picture of what is happening to the child, to the teacher, and to the curriculum in open classrooms. Reports abound of children making important decisions each day affecting their learning and education, of children posing, verifying, and solving their own problems, of an environment rich in materials, tools and activities; of the teacher no longer in the center ring, but in a role supportive

of children's concerns (p. 29).

Examples of the accounts to which Barth refers abound in the writings of early enthusiasts of "open education" in the form of vignettes (e.g., Featherstone, 1967; Grugeon and Grugeon, 1971; Murrow and Murrow, 1971; Central Advisory Council for Education, England, 1973; Schlesinger, 1969; Silberman, 1970; Weber, 1971).

Examples

> ITEM: A junior school in Leicestershire County, serving a working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhood. A class of eight-and-nine-year olds, a happy buzzing group, are returning to their room from physical education. A visitor engages the teacher in conversation as the children are putting their shoes and socks back on. . . . The conversation continues for awhile. Suddenly the visitor becomes aware that all thirty-eight children are busily at work: some are reading, some are writing essays and poems, some are filling in answers in workbooks; one cluster of youngsters are measuring one another's height and constructing graphs of the results; several others are in the science corner performing an experiment (Silberman, 1970, pp. 234-235).

* *

> The general public is hardly aware of what a primary school run on modern lines is like. . . . If he arrived at the official opening hour, he would find that many of the children had been there long before him, not penned in the playground, but inside the school, caring for the livestock, getting on with interesting occupations, reading or writing, painting, carving, or weaving, or playing musical instruments. Probably some of the teachers would also be early, but whether they were or not, would not affect what the children were doing. The visitor might be surprised to learn that when the bell rang, if there was a bell, no very obvious change took place. As the morning went on, he would see various pieces of more organized activity, backward readers being taken as a group, an assembly line of the whole school for prayers and hymns, an orchestra, some movement, some group instruction in mathematics, some exploration outside and so on. During all this time he would hear few commands and few raised voices. Children would be asked to do things more often than told. They would move freely about the school, fetching what they needed, books or material, without formality or interference. Teachers would be among the children, taking part in their activities, helping and advising and discussing much more frequently than standing before a class teaching. Mid-morning break and even mid-day break for lunch would show little change and at the end of the day there would be no sudden rush from school, leaving an empty building, but a much more leisurely and individual departure, so that important tasks could be finished and interesting questions answered [Central Advisory Council for Education, England (Plowden Report), 1973].

* *

* *

ANN: Ann is a five-year-old in her second term at an infant school in a suburban area. She is in a class of five-, six-, and seven-year olds and is engaged in a number of activities which are leading her toward reading. . . .

On her arrival in school in the morning, Ann's first concern is with some seeds she planted the day before. . . . She pokes the soil gently with one finger. Satisfied that nothing has happend, she joins the group seated on the floor and asks the teacher if she may do a painting. The teacher nods. Ann jumps up, puts on her smock, and goes to the corner of the room where a large easel and paints have already been set up. She fills the paper with vivid, colorful strokes and lines, . . . When the painting is done, her teacher comes over to talk about it.

'What a lovely painting. Can you tell me about it?'

'It's a pattern that the sun makes.'

They talk for a few more minutes. An older child looks on and points out the painting to a friend. The teacher gets a pencil. Ann asks her to write on the picture, 'My sun pattern. By Ann,' and watches carefully as the teacher writes the bold letters beneath the painting.

'Let it dry a bit,' says the teachers, 'and then come to me. We'll see if you're ready to trace over the words with a crayon.'

Ann joins a friend at the water table - a large, moveable basin on legs. Using a funnel, they pour water from large containers into smaller ones. Their teacher looks on and talks with them about which container holds more. Ann spends the rest of the morning with her hands and arms deep in the water. She and her friend talk vividly about the water, what it feels like, and whether it will spill as they pour. Ann is totally absorbed in the activity and surprised when the teacher's voice rises above the others in the room.

'Time to clean up. When you have put things away, come and sit by me.' The children protest: 'But we're not finished yet!'

'Don't worry,' says the teacher. 'You can go on with it this afternoon.' Ann and her friend find a rag and mop near the tub of water. In other parts of the room math cards are put back in boxes. Paintings are hung over racks to dry. All is accomplished within minutes, with few directions from the teacher. She trusts her class to do this, . . .

By the time Ann returns from lunch, everyone else has come in from the playground. Some of the children are already at work. Ann asks her teacher what she can do. 'Would you like to join Sarah in the Wendy House? You haven't played there for a few days.' Ann enters the little door . . . with the two other girls in the house, she agrees that she will be the 'auntie', while they play 'mum' and 'granny'. They troop out the door of the Wendy House, pushing a pram, parade through the classroom, and go to the playground, where they continue to act. When they come back in, a short while later, they do not go to the classroom but search out the head teacher, who spends some time talking with them about their play.

After a few minutes, Ann returns to her classroom, where everyone is changing for physical education. She strips to pants and undershirt and joins the others in the hall. When the movement class ends, Ann spends the rest of the afternoon with Sheila, a seven-year-old from her class. They collect the eggs from the chicken coop owned by the school. Sheila asks Ann to count them and then checks her answers. Ann watches

> as Sheila records the number on a chart, which is kept in the corridor so that all can see it. . . . The two girls rejoin their class for a story read by the teacher. As the children leave, Ann checks on her seeds - still no sign of growth - talks briefly with the teacher (Murrow and Murrow, 1973, pp. 18-20).
>
> *
>
> an old stone building, a wall, a bare playground, but with large tubs for painting. Inside, suddenly all is light, movement, color. The first impression is of lovely things on the eye level of five-year-olds, in corners that invite use and lingering - . . . a total pattern of beauty - all for seeing and touching and arranging. . . . There are precious things, lovely things, colorful things . . . all laid out for children to see, to handle, to use. In fact, in all corners all the objects seem to be set out with confidence that the children will handle beautiful things carefully and with respect. And also on view are things the children themselves have made. . . .
>
> An environment bursting with invitation, bursting with all the things children are producing right then and there. . . .
>
> The classroom does not contain the class. The children spill all over in little groups in various areas of the room and hall. The teacher is not behind a desk but moving to all the children. The headmistress is in the midst of it all, too, knowing everyone, helping wherever needed. Talk is going on all the time. Words for activities are being sought all the time. The children seem to know just what they want to do, where to get material, how to go about it. The children move with self-assurance, using their school (Weber, 1973, pp. 22-24).

These descriptions of "open schools" are typical of the narrative accounts which have carried a heavy part of the burden of communication about open education.

Categorized accounts of educational activities in "open schools" have also appeared. For example, in a study of teacher behavior in "informal" schools, Resnick (1972) used a coding schedule which pre-specified certain activities and encounters for focused observation and subsequent summarization. It included designations such as: M = Management; P = Personal; S = Substantive; Q_{mps} = Question from teacher to one or more child; Wh = Teacher asks the child what he is going to do; D_{mps} = A direction to the child to work on a particular task; I_{mps} = Teacher gives information to child. The data resulting from observation of four teachers, over an extended period of time, were used to describe generic features of "informal schools". For example, Resnick asserts, "the most striking feature of open classrooms is the predominance of questions from the teacher to the child" (p. 80). Categorized accounts are not typical of the descriptive literature of "open education", but they are common in descriptive discourse about education. For example, the observation schedules frequently used as evaluation and communication devices in microteaching and other supervisory

situations typically yield categorized descriptions (Amidon and Hough, 1967; Flanders, 1970; Goldhammer, 1969).

The narrative and categorized descriptions exhibit important differences. Typically, deeply-textured narrative descriptions reflect efforts to preserve the flux of a complex educational reality through a wealth of detail. They generally recount instances and particulars, rather than generic objects, actions, interactions, and process. For example, the Murrows communicate the character of student-teacher interactions by detailing particular questions, asked by a particular child, Ann, in particular circumstances, with particular teacher responses. The narrative accounts tend to evoke the mood, atmosphere, and pervasive qualities of educational milieus through evocative imagery. For example, Weber describes an "open classroom" in which "all is light, movement, and color" and "bursting with invitation"; the "classroom does not contain the class". By contrast, categorized descriptions use concensual language to label and dissect out from the flow of essentially non-repeatable particular situations that comprise classroom reality, certain generic activities, interactions, and processes. Resnick's coding schedule specifies for observation Q_{mps} = Question from teacher to one or more child. As part of her description of "open classrooms", Resnick estimates the relative frequency of teachers' questioning behaviors. She does not, however, recount particular questions, asked by particular teachers, in particular circumstances, with particular responses, reactions, and consequences. The terms narrative and categorized descriptions are used as mnemonics to label the endpoints on a continuum of descriptive devices which are associated with important differences in the meanings conveyed in descriptions; many descriptions contain a combination of these devices.

III. The Hidden Dimensions of Meaning in Descriptions of Educational Practice

A. Analysis, Interpretation, and Assessment

Descriptions are rarely purely descriptive, but rather reflect their authors' viewpoints in the form of implicit or explicit analyses, interpretations, and assessments. From a flux of activities, interactions, and milieus, authors must select, through conscious or unwitting analysis, certain aspects for representation. Weber, for example, focuses on the beauty of the physical setting and on teachers' trust of children to care for precious objects and pursue worthwhile activities. Resnick explicitly specifies certain activities and

encounters for observation and descriptive summarization. In these passages, both authors demonstrate a predominantly descriptive intent, because they do not explicitly address the bases for their selection of foci. In section III C, we will extend this discussion by demonstrating how authors' selection of foci reveal their conceptions of the educational activities described.

Descriptions also tend to incorporate interpretations, namely efforts to account for the educational meaning and significance of what is described. As Eisner (1979) comments, "Although there is no sharp and clear line to be drawn between the descriptive and the interpretive, there is a difference in emphasis and focus" (p. 207). How can the reader tease out the interpretive aspects of descriptions? Interpretive passages, according to Eisner address the questions: "What does the situation mean to those involved? How does this classroom operate? What ideas, concepts, or theories can be used to explain its major features" (Ibid.)?

Exponents of "educational criticism"[1] as an alternative mode of educational inquiry and communication recommend that educators should include interpretations and assessments within their descriptions. Eisner (1979) argues, "No one is interested in the facts by themselves but rather in the facts interpreted" (p. 207). Examples of "educational criticism" demonstrate how "critics" embed interpretations within descriptions. McCutcheon (1979), for example, describes a fourth-grade room, as follows:

> Mr. William's fourth-grade room is a room of contrasts. Students' richly colored crayon designs and poetry are pinned up on a bulletin board, proclaiming their creative individuality by their differences in topic, form, and sophistication. . . . Dried weeds, plants, ship models, and ceramics line the shelves in front of windows that serve no apparent instrumental function.
>
> Yet below these decorative, expressive articles sit an SRA reading kit, a row of spelling and phonics workbooks, several sets of mathematics texts and workbooks, and a pile of math contracts. Somehow, they seem out of place among the expressive articles (p. 245).

Within the same descriptive passage, McCutcheon interprets or explains this situation, commenting, "The contrast between materials bears silent testimony to the temporary compromise Mr. Williams has reached between teaching according to

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[1]Note that Eisner (1979) and others use the term "criticism" to connote "the illumination of something's qualities so that an appraisal of its value can be made, not the negative appraisal of something" (p. 191).

his beliefs [developing an environment which would foster students' creativity, problem solving, and independence] and teaching according to parents' desires [focusing on tasklike activities to develop basic skills], two major sources of influence on his curriculum" (p. 245).

While writers of "curriculum criticism" programmatically implant interpretive commentary within descriptions, most authors of descriptions either intentionally or unwittingly also incorporate interpretations. Within a descriptive passage, Weber accounts for the unregimented, but somehow orderly, flow of children, teachers, and activities, commenting, "The children seem to know just what they want to do, where to get materials, how to go about it." By contrast, Resnick formally interprets the significance of the teacher behaviors summarized in her categorized description, as an adjunct to the descriptive passage. For example, she contends that "teachers' predominant questioning behavior most likely models an attitude of inquiry and investigation, communicates to the child a sense of interest in his communicative efforts, and contributes to a sense that children must make choices - and commitments - concerning both the content and manner of their work" (p. 80). These interpretations convey important, but often unrecognized, dimensions of meaning, about the educational significance and underlying rationales of the practices described.

Authors also express either implicit or explicit assessments of the practices they describe. Writers of "curriculum criticisms" programmatically embed evaluations within their descriptions. McCutcheon (1979), for example, concludes her description of Mr. William's classroom, commenting, "On the whole, Mr. William's classroom appears to be a good place for children to be. . . . It is an intellectually intense, stimulating, and supportive environment" (p. 260). Authors of deeply-textured narrative accounts tend to communicate subtle assessments of what they represent. Weber is clearly enthusiastic about the "open classrooms" she has observed, suggested by a description of "corners that invite use and lingering- . . . a total pattern of beauty - all for seeing, touching, and arranging." By contrast, authors of categorized descriptions, such as Resnick, tend to explicitly formulate assessments of the teaching behaviors they summarize. Resnick (1972) observes, "the informal teaching behaviors described have features which seem especially well suited to develop attitudes of inquiry, strong self-evaluation, and self-direction in children" (p. 81). Authors' explicit or implicit assessments of the practices they describe also provide important, but sometimes unrecognized, dimensions of meaning.

All descriptions of educational practice tend to reflect their authors' views, either implicitly or explicitly, in the form of analysis, interpretation, and assessment. Authors of deeply-textured narrative accounts tend to render these expressions of viewpoint in subtle ways such as through imagery. Such devices have the potential to profoundly affect the reader, but these dimensions of meaning may go also unnoticed. Authors of categorized descriptions tend to specify their foci and to explicitly formulate their interpretations and assessments; and, thereby, they do begin to address the significance of what they have described. These different types of descriptions convey important dimensions of meaning - their authors' analyses, interpretations, and assessments - in distinctly different ways.

B. Meanings Conveyed Within a Context of Discourse

Descriptions are generally embedded within contexts of discourse and thereby take on meanings within those contexts through the functions they serve. Often, descriptions are simply used to represent salient aspects of educational practice recommended in guides for practitioners or assessed within evaluation reports or inserted in research reports. Such descriptions, like any descriptions, reflect their authors' views of the practices through their analyses, interpretations, and assessments, and their choices of vehicles of expression (to be discussed in III C).

Descriptions may also be used to illustrate the meaning of terms and concepts, and the character of educational strategies. For example, Denison (1969) uses evocative descriptions of teaching and learning experiences at his 'First Street School' to illustrate the meaning of terms he uses to characterize the educational environment of the school, namely "freedom" and "environment for growth". He comments, "Freedom is an abstract and terribly elusive word. I hope that a context of examples will make its meaning clear" (p. 50). Berlak and her colleagues (1975) use descriptions of two different teachers' classroom practices to illustrate different practical resolutions of dilemmas related to the locus of decision-making for children's learning activities and the sources of motivation for learning. Such descriptions acquire meanings through their association with networks of terms, conceptual structures, and generically phrased educational strategies.

Descriptions are often embedded within persuasive contexts. For example, the descriptions in Silberman's book, Crisis in the Classroom (1970), are clearly

written in the service of arguments designed to persuade readers of the value of ideas and practices associated with "open education". Some authors, such as Denison (1969), explicitly inform their readers that they intend to persuade them of the value of certain educational approaches through descriptions. He comments, "if I can prove nothing at all in a scientific sense, there is still a power of persuasion in the [description of] events themselves, and I can certainly hope that our experience will arouse an experimental interest in other parents and teachers" (p. 5). It is legitimate, of course, to use descriptions for persuasive purposes. However, authors and readers should be aware of the associated tendency, in such descriptions, to focus on selected scenarios which may be appealing, but at the same time distort the character of the educational practices described. For example, descriptions of "open classrooms" have often portrayed scenarios of children working effectively on activities of their choice, without apparent interventions from adults. Yet, such selected scenarios do not adequately convey the role of teachers in managing "open classrooms".

Thus, descriptions take on dimensions of meaning within contexts of discourse through the functions they serve. The most prevalent functions of descriptions within educational discourse are to: (1) represent salient aspects of educational practice; (2) illustrate the meaning of terms and concepts or the character of educational strategies; and (3) persuade readers of the value of recommended approaches. Authors and readers should ascertain the type of context in which descriptions are embedded, since descriptions of the same practices within different contexts are likely to convey different dimensions of meaning.

C. Authors' Conceptions of Educational Practice Revealed in Choices of Media, Foci, and Terms

In principle, descriptions are selective assertions of meaning, choices among vehicles of expression from a universe of possibilities. Descriptions can only represent, not duplicate, reality; and, any phenomenon can generate many different descriptions, depending on authors' perspectives. As Hempel (1952) argues:

> What is sometimes called the complete description of an individual event would require a statement of all the properties exhibited by the spatial region of the individual object involved for the period of time occupied by the event in question. Such a task can never be completely accomplished (p. 37).

In a discussion of Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions within a paper on

evaluation, Kelly (1973) extends Hempel's point:

> When he developed his theory of descriptions, Bertrand Russell understood that to describe an object adequately would logically require collecting an infinite number of descriptions, each representing one of an infinite number of points from which an object could be seen (p. 16).

Kelly adds, "the evaluator will never seriously consider such an effort any more than Russell did" (Ibid.).

We contend that authors of descriptions choose among vehicles of expression in ways that reflect and convey their viewpoints concerning the nature of educational practice and teaching; the character of the particular practices that are the subjects of their descriptions; and audience characteristics. Authors, either consciously or unwittingly, choose vehicles of expression of three types which we label: media, foci, and terms. We will characterize and illustrate these three types of vehicles of expression, particularly with respect to how they convey authors' viewpoints--viewpoints which often tend to be hidden dimensions of meaning.

An author must first select a medium, or modality, to represent educational practice. A variety of media are available, ranging from depictive devices to symbolic encoding. Depiction connotes the use of modalities such as film, photography, or audiotape to capture the character of educational practices. Depictive devices tend to convey expressive meanings which cannot be adequately conveyed through symbolic encoding in discursive language. As Eisner (1979) comments, "people communicate through different expressive modalities and . each modality has the power to convey different types of understanding" (p. 184). For example, an educator may decide to communicate a vivid image of the milieu of "open classrooms" through a series of photographs; or to convey a revealing view of teacher-student interactions through selected videotapes; or to communicate the character of children's accomplishments in "open schools" through recordings of children's musical performances. In a review of the series of booklets included in Informal Schools in Britain Today, Tanaka (1974) comments, "the descriptions of what children did, although often impressive, did not convey the sense of 'realness' experienced by listening to their remarkable and beautiful performance on the record in the booklet, Music" (p. 53). These depictive devices convey rich and complex dimensions of meaning about educational practices; and educators' use of such vehicles to communicate about practices reflects the importance they attribute to the expressive qualities of the practices.

Symbolic encoding refers to the use of conventional signs, such as words, to represent phenomena. As discussed in Section II, the range of symbolic encoding in verbal descriptions extends from deeply-textured narrative accounts to categorized descriptive summaries. Authors' choices from this range of descriptive devices reflect their views of the practices they describe. For example, the Murrows (see Section II) recounted, among a set of similar vignettes, a day in the classroom life of one child, Ann. Their choice of format is particularly well suited to express their view of the importance of individual lives, experiences, interests, and choices in educational milieus. By contrast, Resnick (see Section II) summarized her observations of teachers within "open classroom" settings in a categorized description of generic behaviors, such as questioning or explaining or managing. Her choice of format reflects her view that it is desirable, possible, and meaningful to identify and communicate the regularities and generic aspects of educational practice (Harris, 1982). Here, we observe how different media--deeply-textured narrative accounts and categorized descriptions--convey different dimensions of meaning about similar educational situations. The Murrows' account of particular actions, interactions, and contexts in the classroom life of one child convey and preserve the uniqueness that comprises a particular educational reality, while Resnick's categorized description distills and conveys the generalizable aspects of that reality.

Authors must also select and focus on certain aspects of the array of phenomena that constitute educational milieus and dismiss others; they must choose a particular configuration to represent salient features of educational reality. Authors' choices of foci reflect their perspectives of the educational practice and influence how that practice will be construed. For example, the bulk of narrative descriptions about "open classrooms" portray scenarios of presumably self-motivated children engaged, as individuals and groups, in a variety of productive activities, relatively free from teachers' interventions, a reflection of the view expressed by some proponents of "open education" that children can and should be trusted to engage in productive activities, with minimal adult direction and intervention. Silberman (see Section II) conveys this concept by describing a teacher's involvement in conversation with a visitor juxtaposed against the children's apparently self-directed involvement, in a variety of different productive activities of their own choice. The Plowden Report (see Section II) also conveys this concept in a scenario describing a hypothetical official school opening hour. They conjecture that if a visitor arrived at the

appointed time, he would find that "many of the children had been there long before him . . . inside the school, caring for the livestock, getting on with interesting occupations, reading or writing, painting, carving or weaving or playing musical instruments." Moreover, they hypothesize that "some of the teachers would also be early, but whether they were there or not, would not affect what the children were doing." The details vary, of course, but the foci of these vignettes convey their authors' similar conceptions of educational significance and practice in "open classrooms".

However, other investigators, such as Berlak and her colleagues (1975), focus on aspects of educational practice in "open classrooms" that suggest somewhat different conceptions of its character.

> Mrs. Lawton - In a primary school in one of the poorer sections of Leicester, Mrs. Lawton teaches twenty-five 7-year-olds. The morning is devoted primarily to work in the 'basics' - reading, math, and writing - with a brief interruption for assembly. Mrs. Lawton sets daily minimum work expectations: everyone will write a story, all but the strongest readers will read individually to the teacher or the head, and each will do a given maths task. Moreover, each child works with a small group at his maths and his story at a specified time. During a work period, Mrs. Lawton may tell one child to write a longer story, more often than not ignoring a child's apparent reluctance, but may be satisfied with a shorter story from another child. When a child has finished the required work, or if no work is required at a given time, generally in the afternoons, he may 'choose' from activities such as reading corner, painting, Wendy house, or blocks. At such times, one might see three children in 'dress-up' wheeling a carriage across the playground unbeknown to the teacher, who might be 'hearing' the last of her students read.
>
> Mr. Thomas - On Mondays, Mr. Thomas makes explicit the minimum each child should accomplish for the week in a variety of academic areas. Students can choose to go beyond the minimum or to do other activities, including observing pets and discussing football. They can, in general, allocate their own time during the mornings of the entire week. Thus, the observer might, at any given time on any morning, see children working on various academic tasks while others are chatting quietly, painting, or working with a cooking group. On Fridays, Mr. Thomas and perhaps the head check to make sure students have completed their assigned tasks to the adult's satisfaction; those few who have not will either confer with the teacher or be sanctioned. In the afternoons the students engage in one of a number of schoolwide 'commitments' or 'minicourses'. At 1:00 p.m., they deploy themselves to various locations in the school to join in dance, music, science, 'topic', art, or other activity groups (pp. 225-226).

In this description, children do make choices of learning activities. However, this description also suggests complex parameters of teachers' decision-making and activities, with respect to control of learning activities, motivation for

learning, and setting standards for achievement, which are not conveyed in the earlier descriptions. The Berlaks communicate different conceptions of "open classroom" practices than Silberman and the Plowden Report through their choices of foci, which reflect of course their analysis and interpretation of educational significance in "open classrooms".

Authors must also choose terms to represent the salient features of their realities so that it becomes accessible to their audiences. They can choose among linguistic resources of three types: (1) literal ordinary language; (2) vocabularies from particular disciplines or perspectives; and (3) the inventions of figurative language.

Literal language refers to facets of reality in conventional terms that retain their primary meanings. For example, Silberman (see Section II) describes "a junior school in Leicestershire County, serving a working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhood". This statement identifies aspects of the school's environs in terms with sociological connotations which have become widely accepted as part of our conventional, consensual, everyday language. The Murrows (see Section II) describe Ann's mid-morning in the following literal terms: "Ann joins a friend at the water table - a large, movable basin on legs. Using a funnel, they pour water from large containers into smaller ones." Similarly, Silberman (see Section II) describes the variety of activities that engage children at one point in time at the Leicestershire County junior school.

> all thirty-eight children are busily at work; some are reading, some are writing essays and poems, some are filling in answers in work books; one cluster of youngsters are measuring one another's height and constructing graphs of the results; several others are in the science corner performing an experiment (p. 235).

The literal terms used by the Murrows and Silberman to describe "open classrooms" in the passages just cited are part of our conventional ordinary language and would most likely be understood as intended by their audience and elicit shared concensual understandings.

An author can select terms to represent educational practice that have conventional and technical meanings and uses within particular disciplines or perspectives, such as: "concrete" and "formal operations" from Piagetian developmental psychology; "reinforcement", "operant conditioning", and "extinction" from behavioral learning theory; "id", "ego", and "superego" from Freudian personality theory; or "role", "deference", and "demeanor" from social psychology.

Terms embedded in different disciplinary structures convey different dimensions of meaning about the same educational activities. As Guttchen (1966) comments:

> Any given piece of activity can be described in innumerable if not an infinite number of ways. Among the factors that determine a choice is the availability of conceptual or theoretical material. . . . which supplies the terms for, and the grammar of, the description. Ordinary usage is a primary source. But, we may also draw from educational research, from psychology, psychoanalysis, the whole range of the social sciences, and also philosophy and psychology. Each of these will supply some account of human action.
>
> If each of these areas supplied only one description, we would have problems of choice. But in each of the areas, there are theoretical differences leading to different lines of description (p. 133).

Thus, any of the scenarios presented earlier could have been described in different terms, reflecting the perspectives of different disciplines. The Murrows describe Ann's mid-morning activities in the following ordinary terms: "Ann joins a friend at the water table - a large, movable basin on legs. Using a funnel, they pour water from large containers into smaller ones." If they had said, 'Ann was obtaining concrete experience with the dimensional properties of liquids, one of a number of pre-operational activities leading her towards the operational stage of mathematical reasoning', they would have conveyed dimensions of meaning associated with Piagetian perspectives. The Murrows describe the teacher's response to Ann's painting in the following quote of ordinary language: "What a lovely painting. Can you tell me about it?" If they had said, 'The teacher reinforced Ann for her artistic efforts', they would have conveyed dimensions of meaning associated with the perspectives of behavioral learning theory.

Two points should be made about the use of technical terms from different disciplinary perspectives to describe educational practice. First, although terms embedded within different disciplines can be used to describe the same educational activities, the terms do not communicate the same meanings. In fact, they communicate very different interpretations of educational practice. Second, the theories and disciplines within which technical terms are embedded may be alien to the audience; neither the theories nor the terms may map onto the understandings or the familiar language of the audience and may therefore be inaccessible to them without further explication.

Authors can also use figurative language and rhetorical devices to describe educational practices. In the literature of philosophy and literary criticism, there has been substantial attention devoted to the role of figurative language

in communicating knowledge and conveying expressive meanings (e.g., Alston, 1964; Black, 1962; Cassirer, 1953; Goodman, 1968; Langer, 1957; Richards, 1936; Wheelright, 1954). Figurative language and rhetorical devices are used to convey ideas, feelings, or images by intentionally and inventively deviating from the conventional meanings or syntactical relations of words to create forms or structures which disclose, suggest, or imply their existence. These devices convey expressive meanings which simply cannot be adequately communicated in discursive fact-stating language (Langer, 1957). Among the devices commonly used to convey such meanings are: metaphor, simile, personification, euphemism, contrast, understatement, redundancy, and hyperbole.

As noted earlier, many investigators have argued that the discursive, concensual language typically used to describe educational practice is inadequate to capture many important aspects of educational experience (see p. 1). Several investigators specifically focus on the role of metaphor in educational discourse (Eisner, 1975, 1976, 1979; Kelly, 1975; Miller, 1976; Ortony, 1975; Scheffler, 1960). Exponents of "educational connoisseurship" and "educational criticism" have explored the uses of non-discursive figurative language in rendering educational activities (e.g., Eisner, 1979; Vallance, 1977). For instance, Vallance (1977) illustrates how six techniques of art criticism - selective emphasis; simile and metaphor; 'incidental comparison'; 'implied technique'; 'implied movement'; and 'logically unnecessary adjectives' - can be used to convey the quality of experience provided by curriculum materials.

Why would authors use figurative language and rhetorical devices in descriptions of educational practice? Effective description presents two generic problems. Authors must identify and represent what they view as salient characteristics of educational reality, not only the facets which can be describe in literal, conventional language, but also the atmosphere and pervasive qualities that shape their responses. Authors must also capture a continuum of experience in discrete symbols which cannot, in principle, capture every detail. Neither literal language nor the vocabularies developed within particular disciplines may appear adequate to these tasks.

Figurative language and rhetorical devices are frequently used in the narrative descriptions of "open schools" because many of its exponents believe that the atmosphere and pervasive qualities are particularly important facets of educational practices in these schools and therefore important to communicate. As

Walberg and Thomas (1971) observe, "open education" involves an "approach to teaching characterized by adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness. In the end its essence may in fact be caught only metaphorically" (p. 68). Thus Weber, (see Section II) describes a classroom in which "all is light, movement, color", an "environment bursting with invitation", a "classroom which does not contain the class". The authors of the Plowden Report (see Section II) observe that at the official school opening hour, a visitor would find that "many of the children had been there [inside the school building] long before him, not penned in the playground, but . . . caring for the livestock, getting on with interesting occupations . . ." Through their juxtaposition of terms, "not penned in" and "caring for livestock", the authors suggest teachers' attitudes towards children in "open schools" and thereby convey meanings which cannot be literally expressed.

Figurative language and rhetorical advices, and the narrative descriptions in which they are embedded, present an interesting paradoxical situation with respect to the meanings they convey. Namely, these descriptions are dense in the meanings they express. Just as any educational situation can yield many different descriptions depending on authors' perspectives, so too any portrayal of educational practice that preserves details and conveys mood through evocative imagery can support a wide variety of interpretations and meanings. Just as authors select vehicles of expression, either consciously or unwittingly, that reflect their conceptions of educational practice, so too reader-practitioners interpret descriptions through the lenses of their personal conceptions, perspectives, and experiences.

These descriptions express the literally unexpressible and offer readers rich and complex meanings, conveyed through the entire extension of the vehicles and tenors of their imagery, figures, and rhetorical devices. However, figurative and rhetorical devices thereby lack concensual meanings. As Kelly (1973) observes, "Metaphor provides a range of responses that is open in its extension" (p. 12). Their interpretation is strongly influenced by readers' idiosyncratic, personal perspectives. As Miller (1976) points out, "We cannot be sure that a metaphor has been understood in the way it was intended unless its meaning is explained" (p. 178). Yet, this is exactly what cannot be done, since meanings that could be literally explained would not need to be expressed in figurative language.

Thus, the three types of language we have discussed - literal ordinary lan-

guage; technical terms embedded within disciplines; and figurative and rhetorical devices - differ significantly in the types of meanings they convey. Literal language expresses concensual meanings and tends to elicit reproducible shared understandings. Technical terms embedded within disciplines also have conventional, explicit meanings within their disciplines and have the potential to elicit reproducible shared understandings in readers who are initiated in the disciplines. By contrast, figurative language and rhetorical devices are not concensual language and may not elicit reproducible, shared understandings; so that the descriptions in which they are implanted can support diverse interpretations, some of which may bear little resemblance to authors' intended meanings. We do not intend to suggest that any of the types of terms we have discussed are inferior, but rather that they express legitimately different meanings in ways that have different consequences for yielding shared understandings. Authors and readers of descriptions should be aware of these differences.

We have argued, to this point, that authors who describe educational practices, must choose, either consciously or unwittingly, vehicles of expression of three types: media, foci, and terms; and that authors' choices reveal their viewpoints about the practices--viewpoints which tend to remain undisclosed dimensions of meaning. Basically, we have demonstrated within the literature of open education how two somewhat distinct and prevalent conceptions of educational practice - the nomothetic and idiographic viewpoints (Von Wright, 1971) - and the corresponding conceptions of teaching - teaching as a Technology/Craft or teaching as a Craft/Art (Harris, 1982) - are likely to influence authors' selections of descriptive media, foci, and terms.

Authors, such as Resnick, who view education in nomothetic perspectives and teaching as a Technology/Craft, believe that education is, in principle, controllable by laws and describable in terms of regularities. They tend to believe that efficient, codifiable, replicable means can be designed to achieve specified educational outcomes (1972). Thus, Resnick describes "open classrooms" in a categorized summary of her observations, focusing on observable teacher and student verbal interactions, with literal, conventional terms. By contrast, other educators, such as the Murrows, Silberman, and Weber, who tend to view education in idiographic perspectives and teaching as a Craft/Art, believe that education is a complex set of activities encompassing the full range of human experience which cannot be adequately understood in terms of generalizations, or controlled

through replicable designs, or adequately codified in precise concensual languages. They have a special concern for studying and characterizing the idiosyncratic, evanescent aspects of educational practice. Thus, the Murrows, Silberman, and Weber describe "open classrooms" in rich and detailed narrative accounts, focusing not only on specific encounters and verbal interactions, but also mood and atmosphere, using not only literal terms, but also figurative language and rhetorical devices.

It is clear that similar educational situations can generate different descriptions, which convey different dimensions of meaning, depending on authors' viewpoints and purposes. It is also clear that these different descriptions need not present conflicting meanings, but rather complementary perspectives of the same practices.

There is another important way in which authors' choices of vehicles of expression are associated with hidden dimensions of meaning. Namely, authors can construct many different scenarios to express essentially the same concept, vignettes different in detail, but consistent with the conception; yet the underlying conceptions may remain undisclosed dimensions of meaning. These points will be illustrated in the contexts of artistic expression, behavior consistent with rules, and communication of educational concepts.

Artists' conceptions must be particularized in suitable symbols for effective communication, but they can be embodied in myriad forms. The architect envisions the form of a building. But the client, the lot, the available materials and technology, and a host of fortuitous circumstances shapes its actualization. Frank Lloyd Wright viewed functional, beautiful buildings (in form) as intersections of planes and configurations of rectangles. No one of his buildings is identical to any other, but each is recognizable as an embodiment of his conceptions. In literature, too, the same quality can be expressed in different forms. For example, the tension an author arouses in an audience must be resolved or alleviated. In Macbeth, the murder scene is followed by the porter scene. But Shakespeare could have constructed another scene (with a different set of characters and events) instead of the porter scene, provided it produced the same quality of relationship and contrast, grotesque seriousness followed by grotesque buffoonery. Burke (1968) observes that a gradual rise to a crisis - a crescendo - has a potentially strong emotive effect, but that the crescendo can be embodied in a variety of forms.

> To arouse the human potentiality for being moved by the crescendo, I must produce some particular experience embodying a crescendo, . . . A shoots B in a crescendo, X weathers a flood and rescues Y in a crescendo - the artist may particularize, or individuate the crescendo in any of the myriad aspects possible to human experience, localizing or channelizing it according to the chance details of his own life and vision (pp. 45-46).

Likewise, any rule, guideline, or standard generally may be exemplified in a variety of forms. Numerous different chess moves may be consistent with the rules of the game. There is no limit to the number of different sentences which could be constructed, each consistent with a particular grammatical rule. Similarly, schools that exemplify certain modes of learning can have a variety of forms. As Chittenden (1973) writes in a review of Weber's book, The English Infant School and Informal Education:

> Weber see[s] in the infant schools changes that stem not so much from implementation of a model but rather from efforts to develop and realize, in practice, criteria that relate to the quality of the child's learning and the quality of human relationships within a school. The reference point here is not a model of what a classroom should look like, but rather . . standards regarding the nature of quality in learning. . . . the form and shape of the particular school will of necessity be unique (p. 221).

Thus, "open education" does not require any particular architecture or spaces, or any particular materials, or any particular organizational structure, and so on. It does, however, according to its exponents, require forms that support certain modes of learning.

Authors can convey the concepts associated with "open education", such as learner-control, by describing open space, or interest centers, or children moving freely among classrooms, playground, and corridor, and so on. However, these or any other particular environmental characteristics and activities are only some of the forms that have been adopted by practitioners to embody the concept of learner-control. The conceptions associated with the forms may remain undisclosed dimensions of meaning - either the authors' conceptions of the practices or teachers' meaning structures. The danger in this situation is that readers may equate particular forms with "open education" and fail to obtain understandings of associated concepts; and therefore fail to identify, envision, and use a variety of other forms potentially consistent with conceptions such as learner-control. Thus, conceptions and generalizable approaches associated with the particular forms or scenarios portrayed in descriptions of educational prac-

tice may remain undisclosed dimensions of meaning, meanings which are fundamentally important for understanding the practices. These meanings - conceptions and generalizable approaches - can be elicited through the types of analyses we have illustrated as well as those to be discussed in the next section.

D. Teachers' Assumptions and Generalizable Approaches

Descriptions of educational practice reflect and convey the educational assumptions and generalizable approaches of the teachers portrayed (filtered, of course, through the selective lenses of their authors). These assumptions and approaches tend to remain undisclosed dimensions of meaning. Yet, descriptions of educational practice provide grist for eliciting the meaning structures reflected in educational choices; and thus can serve as one basis for developing practice theories (i.e., rationalized, generalized strategies for educational practice) which would serve to enhance understanding of educational practices.

This general approach has its origins in several established disciplines: hermeneutics or phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and literary criticism or aesthetics. Investigators in each of these areas assume that human action is symbolic, in the sense that human actions, interactions, environments, creations, descriptions, and so on, selectively reflect and symbolize persons' meaning structures. Each of these disciplines has developed approaches for eliciting these meaning structures (Eisner, 1979; Garfinkel, 1967; Schutz, 1970; Van Manen, 1976).

A number of investigators have suggested approaches to the analysis of educational thought and practice which center on eliciting the meaning structures reflected in educational choices. Van Manen (1976) refers to some investigators whose discussions of educational practice have gravitated, at least in part, towards this approach.

> Curriculum orientations which tend to gravitate toward the hermeneutic approach are curriculum as the analysis of educational experience (Dwayne Huebner, William Pinar), curriculum as deliberation, choice-making and consensus-seeking (Joseph Schwab, Decker Walker), and curriculum as qualitative and aesthetic approaches to development and evaluation (Elliot Eisner) (p. 28).

Several particularly interesting examples (in addition to those cited throughout this paper from "educational criticism") illustrate the nature of this approach. Eliot (1976) and Van Manen (1976) used concepts and strategies from ethnomethodo-

logy [elaborated in Schutz (1970) and Garfinkel (1967)] to help teachers self-reflectively analyze the assumptions and meaning structures underlying their routine and taken-for-granted daily routines. Getzels (1974) evokes four different visions or conceptions of the learner, associated with four different classroom architectural forms, thus eliciting meanings symbolized by the environments persons create.

Barth (1969) analyzed written statements of open educators to elicit their assumptions and beliefs about the nature of learning, as a starting point for developing a practice theory for open education. Barth comments:

> In education, as in other domains, practice frequently precedes theory. . . .
>
> The present practice of what I have chosen to call open education is helping to give rise to a coherent educational theory, but at the same time it has been handicapped by the lack of an apparent underlying rationale. Most accounts . . . have been anecdotal and descriptive. . . . Reports abound of children making important decisions each day affecting their learning and education, of children posing, verifying and solving their own problems, of an environment rich in materials, tools, and activities; of the teacher no longer in the center ring, but in a role supportive of children's concerns. Yet, . . . few accounts have attempted anything approaching a systematic analysis of the important assumptions upon which these practices are built. . . . I shall attempt to examine the many written statements offered by open educators to isolate those cases in which an important and relevant belief seems to have been taken for granted (p. 38).

Descriptions of educational practice, as discussed, do provide grist for eliciting the dimensions of meaning which constitute practice theories: (1) rationales for the practices; (2) generalizable approaches which would include decision parameters and coping strategies for implementing the practices in complex school milieus. We will briefly suggest what would be entailed in such analyses.

Descriptions can be used to elicit teachers' assumptions which appear to be associated with the practices portrayed, through a process of interpretation. Silberman describes a scenario in which 38 children proceed to work on a variety of productive activities, presumably without the teacher's direction. One way to explain this occurrence is that it symbolizes in practice teachers' and students' beliefs that "children have the responsibility and the competence to make significant decisions about how to learn". Weber describes an environment replete with "lovely things on the eye level of five-year-olds", "precious things . . . all laid out for children to see, to handle, to use". One way to explain the

character of this environment is that it symbolizes in practice teachers' beliefs that children learn through concrete experiences in richly provisioned, appealing settings.

Descriptions can be used to elicit generalized approaches to implementing conceptions. For example, Resnick used her descriptions of open classrooms as resources for starting to develop general prescriptive strategies for open education. She commented, "data . . . permitted the descriptive characterization of certain features of informal teaching and thus provided the basis for clarifying how some key instructional and management functions are met in the open classrooms observed" (p. 80). For instance, Resnick describes teachers' patterns of extended substantive conversations with one child or small groups, interspersed with brief, frequent child-initiated interactions, and extended interactions initiated by teachers. She suggests that through these patterns teachers maintain organization and guidance in settings with student choice and varied activities by meeting demands for attention quickly, permitting interruption of extended conversations, and maintaining high frequency of contact. These types of interpretations contain the germ of a practice theory for open education in the sense that they suggest generalizable practical teaching strategies.

IV. Conclusion

Descriptions of educational practice serve fundamentally important purposes in many educational contexts, such as communicating about practices in guides for teachers and in evaluation reports. In this paper, we characterized descriptive discourse and characterized and illustrated some of the hidden, and typically undisclosed, dimensions of meaning available in descriptions for understanding educational practice. These meanings inhere in: (1) authors' implicit or explicit analyses, interpretations, and assessments and the context in which they embed descriptions; (2) authors' views about the practices revealed in their choices of media, foci, and terms; and (3) teachers' conceptions and pedagogical approaches revealed in the environments they create.

Our purposes were to help authors choose vehicles of expression with a keener sense of the meanings they are conveying; to help educators read descriptions of educational practice with greater acumen and understanding, and to develop analytical categories and approaches for use in studying educational discourse. We have assumed that adequate understanding of an educational practice requires know-

ledge of underlying conceptions or rationales and general pedagogical approaches used in complex school milieus. If descriptions are to contribute to such understanding, they must be presented or read in conjunction with the type of analyses we have elucidated or with a view towards eliciting the dimensions of meaning we have characterized.

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